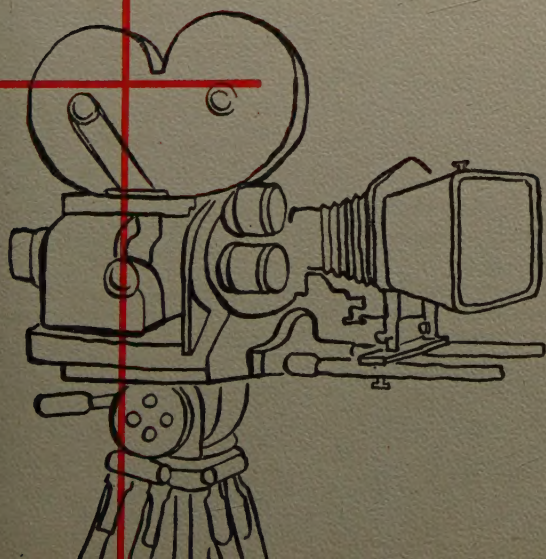


SOCIAL ACTION

Hollywood Movies
and the Church



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SOCIAL ACTION

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The views expressed in the magazine do not necessarily represent the official policies of the Council for Social Action. The editor seeks articles from persons of assured competence and presents their views as worthy of thoughtful consideration by our readers.

Hollywood Movies and the Church

By Van A. Harvey

'Hollywood' is one of America's favorite whipping boys. Almost everyone can find something to criticize in the film colony. Intellectuals deprecate its triviality. Pastors deplore its moral standards. Rightists call it left. Leftists call it right. Protestants protest that it is pro-Catholic. Catholics say that it is dominated by anti-Catholics. Despite all this criticism, Americans will place around one billion, one hundred and sixty million dollars in movie box offices this year. Investigated, lampooned, denounced, Hollywood still entertains us and our children and is a mirror of American life to those abroad.

There is a great deal wrong with the motion picture industry but what is wrong is not necessarily what the churches criticize. More often the sporadic denunciations of divorce, immorality and sin in Hollywood only scratch the surface of the ills of the motion picture industry in America. Like much of the Christian approach to faults in our society, the indignation is directed toward sensational effects and reveals an impatience with the complexities of real causes.

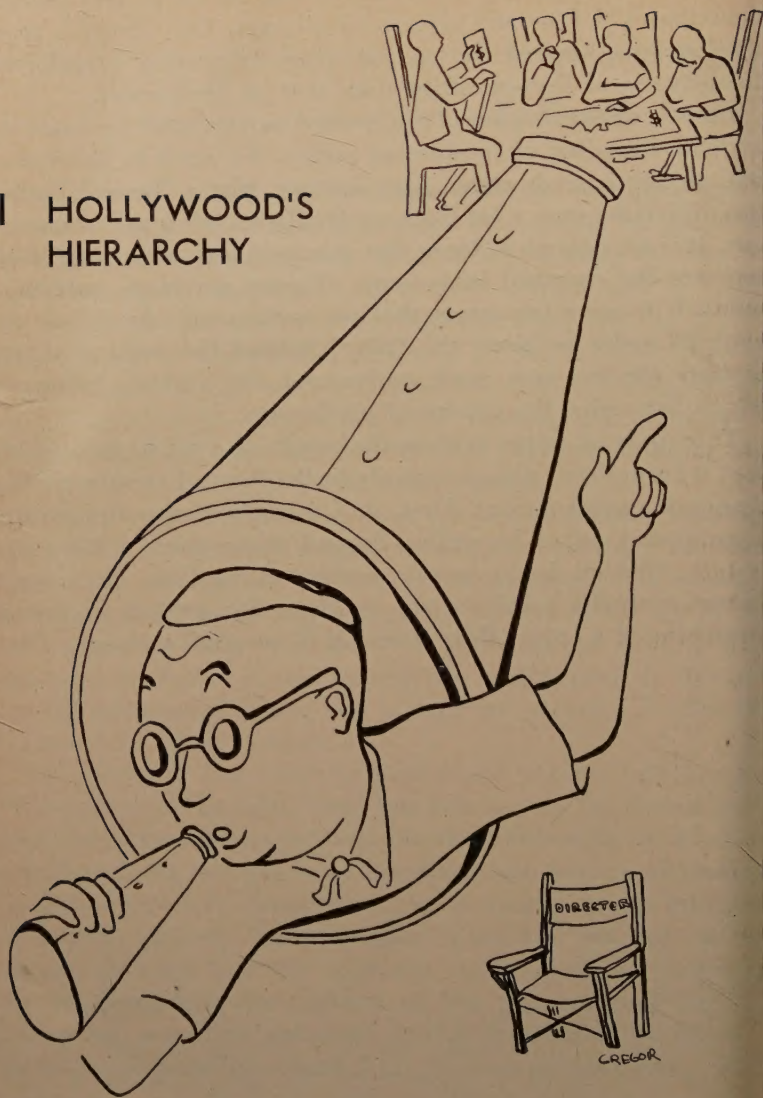
The churches denounce the Hollywood "divorce mill," or the "loose living of the stars," but they fail to pose the deeper question about the star system itself, which produces, in the kinds of actors it selects, the insecurity, loneliness and anxiety which help to create the very immorality the churches decry. Ministers frequently criticize the trivialities of movies, but are too impatient to learn how the economic structure of the movie industry determines the content of the pictures they deplore. Clergymen are often indignant at the unfavorable portrayal of their vocation on the screen, but are unaware that their defer-

siveness, multiplied by a thousand other vocations and groups, contributes to false and superficial pictures. The Church's negative attitude toward the movies more frequently reveals the inadequacy of Protestantism than that of Hollywood.

Constructive criticism of Hollywood movies must be based on an understanding of *production policy*. We need to know why one picture is made rather than another, why a "formula" story has preference over what Hollywood calls an "off-beat" (unusual) one. It is not enough to know that romantic love, stars, and lavish sets are the essential ingredients of most cinematic entertainment. It is more important that we understand *why* this is the case. In order to know the "why" behind the content of the motion pictures one must understand the various influences which determine the process of production.

This study attempts to show the results of a production policy that is formulated almost entirely in the light of certain narrow economic considerations. First, such a production policy creates a peculiar kind of hierarchy. Second, it produces a false star system. Third, it determines the content of the films. These three factors mutually reinforce one another. The present process is something of a circle. How vicious it is, we shall soon see.

I HOLLYWOOD'S HIERARCHY



Hollywood's Hierarchy

In some respects it is a disillusioning experience to visit a motion picture studio. The reality of a familiar looking street and a group of trees is dissolved into a network of painted flats and plaster-of-paris casts. The real business of motion pictures turns out to be an unglamorous whirl of a thousand enterprises one rarely, if ever, associates with actors and actresses. Into the filming of one scene involving well-known faces goes the energy of countless unknown persons who paint sets, focus lights, adjust microphones, retouch make-up, process and edit film. Actors and actresses, directors and producers are the more familiar and glamorous parts of an industry that hires some forty thousand anonymous people who perform innumerable services behind the scenes in order to make the movies.

The public is not always aware that the actual nerve center of the motion picture industry is in New York, not in Hollywood. The final authorities, the real determinants of policy, are not the producers and directors, but the executives who inhabit the suburban communities of Connecticut and New Jersey.

Lillian Ross, a writer for *The New Yorker* magazine, expressed her surprise at this discovery of the real core of the film industry in this fashion:

Almost two years before, I had become interested in "The Red Badge of Courage," and I had been following its progress step by step ever since, to learn what I could about the American motion-picture industry. Now, three thousand miles from Hollywood, in an office building at Forty-fifth and Broadway, I began to feel that I was getting closer than I ever had before to the heart of the matter.

The "heart of the matter" is the economic character of the industry. The arteries of the motion picture enterprises weave intricately in and out of the executive office buildings of several large corporations in New York. The ultimate policy makers are the officers of the corporation who, with the Board of Directors, are responsible to thousands of investors. The motion pictures are big business.

As an industry, the motion pictures rank with the larger ones

in America. The various corporations which control the several studios have interests that extend far beyond the production units in Southern California.* Even without these subsidiaries, there are several billion dollars invested in the Hollywood studios, almost one and a half million devoted to reimbursing seven top executives alone. The employees include some of the most widely recognized people in the world, but the real leaders (Nicholas Schenck, Barney Balaban, Spyros K. Skouras, Ned E. Depinet, H. M. Warner) are relatively unknown outside of a small circle.

Seen from New York the basic unity is the corporation; from Hollywood, the studio. There are seven major production studios: MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, Paramount, Universal-International, Warner Brothers, Columbia, and RKO; several "minors"—somewhat unkindly called "poverty row"—and one major distribution company, United Artists.

The executive head of the production studio in Hollywood is usually a vice-president in the larger corporation, and frequently he takes charge of production as well as studio administration. When he does this, he is the executive-producer who probably is the person in the hierarchy most importantly affecting film production. He has immediate supervision over all the elements of production, the hiring and firing of personnel, the assigning of producers and directors, the selection of stories, the build-up of stars, even, in some instances, the casting of pictures. His power and influence frequently mold the entire character of a studio and its output.

The executive-producer's responsibility to the corporation in New York is defined primarily in terms of profits. His success is not measured in the number of "prestige" pictures he pro-

*About two years ago the United States Supreme Court upheld a special court decision forcing motion picture corporations to divorce exhibition functions from production-distribution functions, such divorcement to become effective by 1952. Twentieth Century-Fox, for example, completed its separation by reorganizing its theatres under National Theatres, Incorporated which, according to the *New York Times*, "owns a group of subsidiaries operating 437 theatres in the twenty states." Charles P. Skouras, brother of Spyros (head of Twentieth Century-Fox) continues as head of the new corporation.

duces, but rather by the dividends he is able to return to the stockholders. Stockholders rarely ask, "Was it a good picture?" More often they ask, "What did it gross?" So, too, the executive-producer does not usually inquire, "Is it an 'honest' picture?" but, "How much can you bring it in for?"

The degree of control exercised by New York probably varies from studio to studio. At one studio, not only are production plans and estimated budgets checked with the Eastern office, but daily shooting logs are flown each night to New York. The head of the studio is never allowed to forget who ultimately is boss. He knows in what direction he is to raise his eye for approval, and what voice demands his rapturous attention. His calendar is marked in terms of the bi-monthly visits of the vice-president from New York.

The executive-producer actually serves as a sort of mediator between the businessmen of the corporation and the so-called "wild men" of Hollywood. He is expected to combine business sagacity with an eye for "great entertainment." More often than not, he himself is a showman. On occasion his own personal history is the epitome of the larger history of the motion pictures. Some of the old studio heads, men like Louis B. Mayer and

WATCH FOR THESE NAMES

Most of the writers, directors and producers whose names appear below have maintained a high calibre of work over the years. On occasion some of them may have produced mediocre films, but possibly under extenuating circumstances. We believe that some sort of list might aid the reader to know whom we have in mind when we speak of "the artists." This is, of course, a hazardous undertaking, for the list is necessarily exclusive and omits the names of many who should appear. We offer it very tentatively.

Frank Capra	Elia Kazan	Robert Rossen
Charles Chaplin	Stanley Kramer	Dore Schary
John Ford	Joseph Mankiewicz	Robert Siodmak
Carl Foreman	Mark Robson	William Wyler
John Huston	Louis de Rochemont	Fred Zinnemann

Samuel Goldwyn, literally grew up in the industry. Some of them began by buying nickelodeons or renting stores and theatres. Later they started their own studios. They witnessed the advent of sound, and with it the beginning of the decline of their own power, for the tremendous outlay necessary for sound production and the wiring of theatres meant that these early producers had to turn to large financial interests for backing. The studio head became a cog in a machine that had outgrown him.

Richard Brooks in his novel, *The Producer*, has a fictional studio head say:

Ed Falx, the boss, went to work for a boss. This is my studio, but it don't belong to me, any more. I take orders. From New York. Something goes wrong, the phone rings. New York. Investors, Banks, Stockholders. Exhibitors. They eat my heart out. Do this, do that. Be careful. Don't take chances. . . .

The executive-producer has several lesser producers responsible to him. Although these producers are members of the "in-group" of Hollywood their position is, nevertheless, precarious. They are usually under a contract which gives their studio the opportunity of dropping them at the end of each six-month period. Their tentative status in the hierarchy depends on their ability to make the figures in the comptroller's book loom round and large. Lillian Ross quotes Gottfried Reinhardt, a producer at MGM, as having said:

A producer is not supposed to divorce his judgment from commercial considerations. Even the head of a studio can sometimes with impunity think in purely artistic terms. He makes forty pictures a year. The producer makes one or two. If those are flops—that's his product. He is a flop. He may be an "artist" but a flop.

The producer dominates the entire process of the making of a single film. Although he works within the larger control of the executive-producer, he is in direct charge of the immediate aspects of production, supervising direction, the writing of a screenplay, the cutting and editing, and even the musical score. Yet many producers know nothing about any of these crafts.

their primary asset being their reputed gift for intuiting a "sure smash." Persons who have done both "producing" and other jobs—directing or writing—are inclined to hold the talent required for "producing" in rather low esteem.

The producer has not always held such a dominant place. During the period following the first World War, for example, the director was the decisive figure. It was his influence which was apparent in all the various steps culminating in the finished product. He often wrote the screenplay himself, selected the cast, directed, and even edited the film. His personality and creativity were stamped on the picture. Now these functions are separated and are under the control of a producer whose dominant concern is "good entertainment" that will be "box office."

The emergence of the producer points up the history of the motion pictures. During the period from 1914 to 1918, as Lewis Jacobs shows, the motion picture industry began to assume the proportions of a big business. There was great enthusiasm for the new medium. Hollywood was becoming known as a gold mine. To meet the growing demand for movies, the studios began to rely on mass production techniques and the division of labor.

The growth of mass production made it necessary to insure a wider and more secure market. The heads of the studios quickly saw that such a market could only be insured if the producing companies themselves took over the functions of exhibition and distribution. For a while it was evident that whoever controlled the theatres held the key to the control of the industry.

Increasingly the values of the exhibitor and distributor dominated the motion pictures. Yet, between 1918 and 1926, many directors were still in control of their own pictures. It was during this period of the middle twenties that some of the most creative motion pictures of all time were made. Out of this era emerged many film immortals—D. W. Griffith, Ernst Lubitsch, Charles Chaplin, Eric von Stroheim, Rex Ingram, and others.

The conversion to sound brought something of a revolution.

Studios which were already relying heavily on outside financial resources to meet rising production costs—*Birth of a Nation* cost one hundred thousand dollars in 1915, *Ben Hur* ten years later cost six million—were forced into even greater dependence on the financial centers of the East. The businessmen were not willing, of course, to invest their capital without retaining some voice in the control of expenditures. The producer became that voice. Gradually he assumed more and more power, since he held the purse strings of production. After 1928, except in a few cases, the director declined rapidly in power. And the producer, eager to make money and only secondarily interested in a vital medium, depended increasingly upon stars, formula pictures, and “production values” (lavish sets and costumes, masses of extras, and the like).

When the motion picture industry sustained itself with remarkable success through the first two or three years of the depression, investors began to pay it special attention. In the middle thirties, these businessmen solidified their control. The climax was reached in 1937-38 when Nate Blumberg, president

RECOMMENDED MOVIES

The writer and the editor suggest these recent movies, of widely different kinds, as examples of the worthy products of Hollywood:

Anything Can Happen	The Quiet Man
High Noon	The Red Badge of Courage
Place in the Sun	Where's Charley
Singing in the Rain	The Big Sky
Street Car Named Desire	

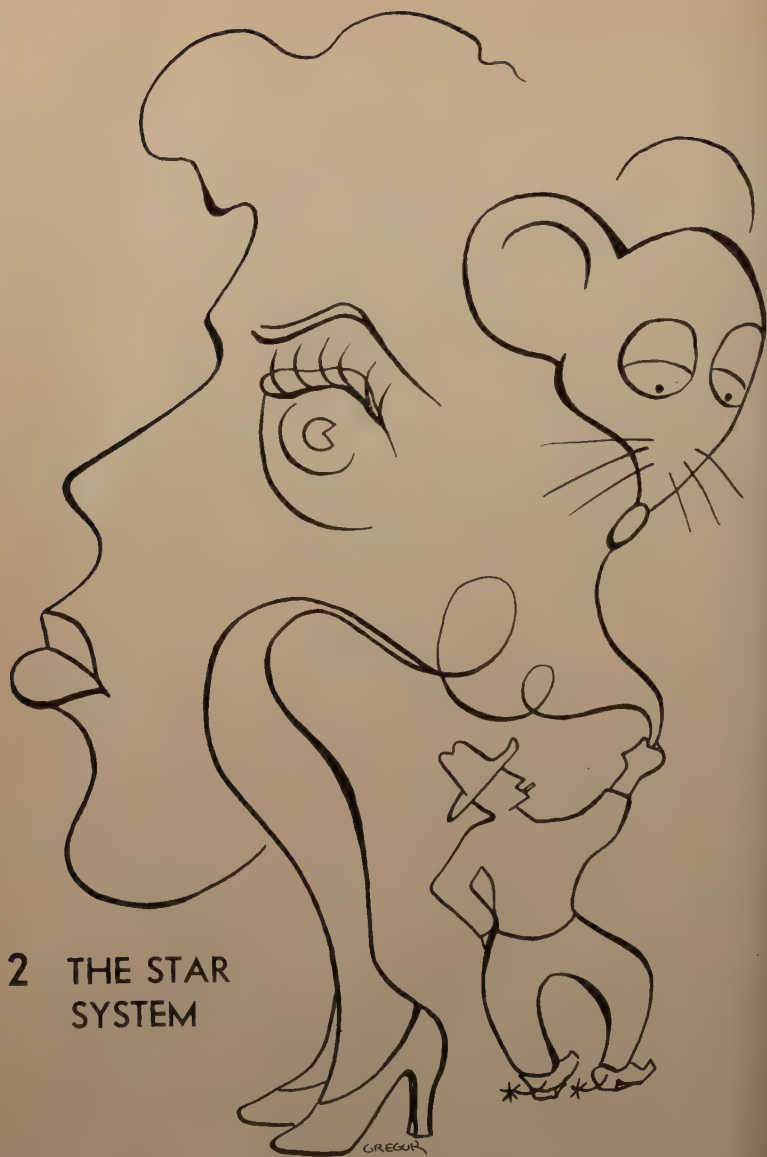
Foreign films are finding a wider audience in this country, especially in the “art theatres” in larger cities. Sometimes sensationally and falsely advertised, these foreign films are often of the highest merit, as in the post-war Italian films (*Open City*, *Shoe-shine*, *Paisan*), the Ealing Studio English comedies (*Tight Little Island*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *The Man in the White Suit*), and the works of outstanding directors like Carol Reed (*Outcast of the Islands*).

of Universal Studios, completely reorganized his studio and placed in charge of production two men trained solely in exhibition and distribution. They admittedly knew nothing of production, but they "knew audiences." Pictures were made for definite markets. By utilizing old scripts, formula pictures, and a few proven stars, and firing all temperamental artists, they raised the gross sales of Universal in three years from eighteen million to a little over twenty-seven and a half million dollars. Leo Rosten calls this step by Universal the most significant development in recent years in production policy. The calibre of the cinema did not improve, but profits did. The producer became king.

To the executive and producer trained in exhibition and distribution, motion pictures are "entertainment." Entertainment for them is synonymous with the flamboyant values of "show business." Public taste is the determining factor of "good entertainment," and public taste is measured in terms of box office receipts. Box office receipts finally determine production policy.

The movies thus became involved in economic patterns which pretty well determine production policy. They built mammoth and ornate theaters, with a large overhead, which had to be filled with thousands each night; they came to expect exorbitant profits, to pay enormous salaries, and to employ wasteful practices; and most of all, as we have seen, they played with such big stakes that the stakes, rather than the product, came to be the industry's central determinant, and control passed into the hands of those whose only concern was the stakes.

Of the effects of the production policy which resulted from this concern and this control, we will examine two of the most important: the star system, and the content of the movies.



2 THE STAR
SYSTEM

The Star System

To most of the world Hollywood is synonymous with "stars," so much so that visitors driving out-of-state automobiles down Sunset Boulevard seem disappointed to discover that *everyone* wears dark glasses, that the corner of Hollywood and Vine has nothing to distinguish it from thousands of other American corners, and that Grauman's Chinese Theatre is not the meeting place of the colony elite.

Only a few signs give away the fact that this is Hollywood. Travel agents dressed like Good Humor men stand out on Sunset Boulevard waving maps to guide sight-seers to the "homes of the stars." Beautiful girl car-hops step smartly to the sides of powder-blue Cadillac convertibles in the hopes of attracting a "talent scout."

The absence of stars at Hollywood and Vine should not lead us to doubt that the stars are an essential ingredient of the present motion picture industry. They may be scorned by directors, pampered by the producers, hated by agents and publicity men, but all of these know that "movie stars" are their bread and butter. Stars are the livelihood of hundreds of agents, legal advisors, gossip columnists, fashion designers, magazine publishers, some psychiatrists and a few religious charlatans. People do not pay to see directors or applaud producers. People pay to see their favorite stars.

The star system is almost as old as the industry itself. It grew out of the cut-throat competition that marked the production of pictures between the years 1908 and 1914. During those six years nine leading manufacturers and distributors combined to forestall any future competition by forming the Motion Picture Patents Company. These manufacturing companies pooled all their patent claims, licensed each other to produce moving pictures, and then contracted with Eastman Kodak Company, the largest manufacturer of raw film, to sell film only to the members of the licensed pool. In addition, they instituted a ruthless tax policy by which exhibitors were charged a weekly rate for the use of projectors and film. This, coupled with the

threat to confiscate projector and film in case the exhibitor showed independent companies' films, practically insured a monopoly.

The small independents fled from New York, then the center of production, to San Francisco, Florida, Southern California—even Cuba. Southern California proved the most convenient location of all. It provided cheap labor, the cooperation of real estate interests, good weather, and the friendly border of Mexico to which producers could flee when the long arm of the Patents Company threatened.

According to Lewis Jacobs, it was Carl Laemmle, a leading independent, who introduced the star system. He was casting around for some way to break the stranglehold of the Patents Company and noticed that certain actors and actresses were popular enough to draw larger audiences than others. The large manufacturing companies had refused to give screen credits to their actors, fearing that certain favorites might use their prestige to demand higher salaries. Laemmle contracted for the exclusive services of Florence Lawrence, the "Biograph Girl." Soon after he did this, a news item appeared in a St. Louis paper saying that the former "Biograph Girl," Florence Lawrence (her name had never appeared before) had been killed in a street-car accident. Immediately, Carl Laemmle ran a half-page advertisement denouncing the news report as a "black lie."

It was a black lie because so cowardly. It was a silly lie because so easily disproved. Miss Lawrence was not even in a street-car accident, is in the best of health, will continue to appear in "Imp" film, and very shortly some of the best work in her career is to be released. We now announce our next film. . . . (The Motion Picture World, March 10, 1912, quoted by Jacobs.)

The star system was born, and with it a new era of motion pictures. Other companies quickly followed the lead of Laemmle. Publicity men were hired to "build-up" certain actresses and actors. Some studios even printed magazines devoted exclusively to the intimate details of the private lives of their stars. Fabulous

salaries were offered. The process of creating and maintaining stars became an industry within an industry.

Certain actors and actresses with superior ability will inevitably rise to the top of their profession. There will always be stars in this sense. But the present star system has little to do with ability or talent. More often it may have a great deal to do with something called "sex appeal" or "personality."

"Sex appeal" is, in a sense, *sui generis*. Publicity men maintain that whatever it is it can only be pointed at, never defined. On occasion they compensate for their verbal loss by saying "oomph" and "It." Or they may explain it to producers with "I tell you, she comes right down off the screen!"

For the few genuinely electric personalities, however, there are scores of others whose alleged "sex appeal" is merely the result of an advertising campaign.* With some actresses, such "appeal" has nothing to do with a unique self or personality which gives sex any character. Hollywood, as a matter of fact, has rarely produced a genuinely sensual or earthy actress. Its publicity has, rather, attached sexual value to impersonal symbols of sex, to a name, or to a piece of a person, to legs or a bust.

It is, for example, almost incredible that Howard Hughes could catapult Jane Russell to fame by means of a million dollar publicity campaign devoted entirely to advertising her most notable physical attribute, an extraordinary bosom, despite the evident fact that Miss Russell had little acting ability. Like many such cases, it was a triumph of sheer press agency.

Herbert McLuhan in his *The Mechanical Bride* reflects on hosiery ad picturing only a pair of woman's legs on a pedestal. He says:

To the mind of the modern girl, legs, like busts, are power points which she has been taught to tailor, but as parts of the success kit rather than erotically or sensuously. . . .

*For the "once-in-a-decade" Marlene Dietrich or Jean Harlow there are hundreds of others who have been completely forgotten. One need only look through a five- or six-year-old fan magazine to be aware of the large number of starlets and stars who never "caught on" and who, after languishing on contracts, were finally dropped by the studios.

She knows that "a long-legged gal can go places." As such, her legs are not intimately associated with her taste or with her unique self but are merely display objects like the grill work on a car.

Hollywood has drawn upon, and helped to create, this mechanical externalization and fragmentization of personality. Remember, for example, how many stars have been publicized to fame with a name which isolated one physical characteristic: "the look," "the body," and so on.

The other commodity for the studio's press agents to sell is the star's "personality." On occasion it may be a genuine expression of his real self. More often the stars are successful because they embody certain stereotypes—the girl-next-door, the bombshell, the strong silent hero, the gangster, the adolescent. Once identified with such a type, it is sometimes impossible for an actor to get any other kind of role. The public will not accept him as another personality.

Frequently the studio publicity department creates the screen personality. Pete Martin in *Hollywood Without Make-up* tells the story of Ava Gardner's rise to stardom. On contract to MGM, she went unnoticed until she attracted attention in "The Killers," a picture made when she was "loaned out" to Universal-International. Realizing they had a potential box-office attraction, MGM's publicity department called a policy meeting to decide what kind of personality would be most readily merchandisable. They debated whether she should be the Elizabeth Taylor type (at that time, "girlish simplicity"), the Lana Turner type (upper case sex), or the Greer Garson type (ladylike). It was decided that she should be the "every-kind-of-girl type."

Since acting ability is no prerequisite to success, stories are chosen to be vehicles for certain stars and not vice versa. A studio which has one hundred and twenty-five thousand a year invested in an actor's contract finds it financially expedient to find roles he or she can play. Occasionally a star will force the studio to eliminate unsympathetic elements in the part he is to play lest it hurt his popularity. He may even refuse to play a role. The

resulting fight with the "front office" may cost the studio thousands of dollars.

The effect of the star system on the actors is also important. The star believes, for good reasons, that his acceptance by others depends on very external qualities—good looks, wistful eyes, a profile, or a fine physique. Since fame so won may be so lost, and since such externality furnishes little internal security about one's worth, stars are frequently lonely and anxious. Their anxiety may attach itself to any problem, the next role, the coming option, the trustworthiness of an agent, their current picture, or the New York reviews. Their whole life may be an attempt to be thought well of, to be "box-office" to those around them. They must travel with established stars, entertain the "right people," keep in touch with their agent, and cultivate the right contacts.

Worst of all, success for the star may be empty, for failure is only one "flop" away. The past has no real efficacy; only present results are important.*

The motion pictures reflect the spirit of the community out of which they are created, and the community is shaped by the patterns of production policy, like the star system. This hardly makes for a rounded and realistic view of the world. Just as some national magazines mirror the general mentality of Eastern suburban life, so the movies reflect Hollywood's view of human existence.

It is fruitless to counsel the industry entirely to junk the star system. Present production is established on it. Relevant criticism must seek rather to guide those in Hollywood who understand this aspect of the problem, and who struggle to reform the basic structure of the industry itself from within, to modify and use the star system for more genuinely honest and personal films.

*For a remarkable testimony of the emptiness of her success, see Betty Hutton's confession "How to be Unhappy on \$300,000 a Year" in *Esquire*, May, 1952.



3 CONTENT OF THE MOVIES

GREGOR

The Content of the Movies

Hollywood is now in the midst of an acute financial crisis. The pages of *Variety*, the trade journal, are full of reports of new "economy drives," new remunerative schemes and drastic revisions of production schedules. Such crises often reveal the basic philosophy of the movie makers.

The overriding consideration of all policy is to reduce the risk attending the manufacture of any one picture. When there was plenty of money to be had, the studios could afford to experiment, to gamble on unusual pictures. But when Hollywood tightens her belt the first expendable is the "off-beat" picture, the one that might not "catch on," or which would appeal only to a limited group. No picture is undertaken unless the executives have been convinced that it is a "sure smash." Most of them can intuit a "sure smash," they say, by looking at the producer, the stars, and a synopsis of the story. No chances must be taken with pictures lacking love interest, stars, clear plot outline, or "up-beat" (happy) ending. Every film must have a "universal appeal."

The result of such a policy is a deadly levelling of the content of the cinema. Studios now in competition with television believe that they cannot afford to sink a million or two dollars into a picture that will only have limited appeal. All pictures, consequently, must strive for the biggest possible box office draw. They must all be something to which, the producer likes to think, the "whole family" can go. One producer made the philosophy explicit to Lillian Ross:

The public wants pictures like "Ma and Pa Kettle." I say make pictures the public wants. . . . Biggest box-office draws are pictures catering to the intelligence of the twelve year-old.

Pictures must attempt to please everybody. The audience, in the producer's mind, is a mass audience with no individuality and no distinctive tastes, composed of biological organisms that like bright lights, pleasant sounds and periodical sexual satisfaction.

Motion picture producers ought not to be blamed, however, for wanting to make profits. Many film critics who want the cinema to represent a "realistic" art tradition often take a very unrealistic view of the business aspects of the industry. Studios cannot be blamed for wanting to reap dividends for their financial backers, or for attempting to save an investment of a million or so dollars sunk in a picture. Production costs are staggering. MGM, for instance, spent four hundred thousand dollars for just one thirteen-minute ballet sequence in "An American in Paris." "Quo Vadis" represented a total outlay of eight and a half million dollars. Furthermore, Hollywood claims to have discovered that only pictures with big "production values" make great profits. In other words, the only way to substantial profits is through expensive pictures, for the medium cost productions have been proven to be the most consistent source of losses.

The profit the executives have in mind, however, is usually one of 200 to 400 per cent. Students of the industry claim that such extraordinary monetary return is not essential to keep the medium alive and is really the product of a nostalgia for the "good old days" when such profit was usual. A more realistic view of the present market and of the long-run interests of the industry would hold that Hollywood should be content with smaller profit on individual films and should increase her net gain by eliminating the present waste in production.

A somewhat different suggestion runs along these lines: The reason lavish production pictures are the big money earners is that they tap an existing audience. Unusual pictures are not so successful because Hollywood has not cultivated an audience to which such pictures would appeal. Gilbert Seldes points out that most people over thirty years no longer go to the motion pictures because there is nothing mature for them to see. This adult audience, so far as Hollywood is concerned, is an untapped reservoir. It can only be exploited by producing pictures that will appeal to it. This will entail a period of financial risk, to be sure. But Hollywood could plan to use some of the extraordinary profit gained from the extravaganzas to offset the mediocre

profits made at first on those films which have a more limited appeal.

Pictures of high quality can be filmed on fairly low budgets. As proof, one need only point to men like Stanley Kramer, Louis de Rochemont and many of the foreign directors. Present production policies are fantastically wasteful. Casting is often drawn out over long periods of time. Fabulous sums are paid for well-known stories while competent writers of original stories are kept on contracts. Rehearsals are held on the sets while crews stand idly by. When we add to this the incompetence of many producers and directors, the mediocrity of most high salaried actors and actresses, the lack of any scientific studies of audiences, the hit and miss policy of advertising, we have a fairly solid indictment of the present motion picture economy.

RECOMMENDED READING

Lewis Jacobs: *The Rise of the American Film, A Critical Study*. An excellent history of the film in this country since 1896. Most of the historical background of this article was based on Jacobs' study.

Roger Manvell: *Film*. Well illustrated. Deals with the cinema as an art, its relation to society, the artist-entertainer controversy, and the motion pictures in other countries. A Pelican Book. Mr. Manvell also edits *Cinema*, which discusses the best pictures of the past year.

Ruth A. Inglis: *Freedom of the Movies*. The Report on Self-Regulation from the Commission on Freedom of the Press. It is an excellent discussion of the problems of censorship.

Hortense Powdermaker: *Hollywood the Dream Factory, An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*. A very uneven book, it is chiefly to be valued for the wealth of material and the number of actual case studies of actors, producers, directors, and writers which the author has collected.

Lillian Ross: "Onward and Upward With the Arts," *The New Yorker*, May 24-June 21, 1952. A very candid look at the making of John Huston's "Red Badge of Courage."

Leo Rosten: *Hollywood, the Movie Colony, the Movie Makers*. Although slightly dated, it is still one of the best single books on the motion picture colony and those who inhabit it.

The basic question is whether the motion picture industry has any responsibility to the public at large to elevate its tastes and to incur the financial risk involved in such elevation. Roger Manvell in his book *Film* puts it this way:

We do not ask for a continuous stream of masterpiece . . . We ask for honest craftsmanship with honest entertainment values. . . . We want the musical, the detective story and the romance to be honest in their own right. We do not want all films to be highbrow, but we do want the rare artist when he emerges to be allowed to make the rare film his way.

It is frequently a surprise to the critic to discover that his simple advice to the film industry does not meet with a favorable response. He is even more surprised when the top executives retort that they do not believe that Hollywood has a responsibility to educate the public. Motion pictures they protest are entertainment, pure entertainment. The cinema is a business that capitalizes on the need for recreation. The producers resent the "high brow" critic who implies that this is not a valid occupation. Hortense Powdermaker quotes an editorial from *The Hollywood Reporter*:

The drawing-room set is yelling: "Stop making pictures for Glendale. Stop catering to the morons and bring pictures up to an intelligent level. . . ."

We believe the majority of men at the head of this business—showmen that they be—are possessed of as much intelligence as the drawing-room set.

Pictures are essentially for entertainment. That's what has built this great industry—ENTERTAINMENT. . . .

Glendale has been good enough for us for thirty years. It should be good for another hundred.

The struggle between the proponents of the "movies are entertainment" thesis and the so-called "artists" is one that goes to the heart of the industry. It is basically a fight over the philosophy of motion picture-making and its function in our society. The writers and directors among the artists maintain that the motion pictures are an art form, the businessmen that they are

entertainment. The artists, for the most part, hope to develop what they call a realistic tradition, one that faithfully records life in all its depth, its tragic as well as happy character, its evil and ambiguity as well as its beauty and definiteness.

The businessmen entertainers have a deep mistrust of the artists. This mistrust is more than petty jealousy. The artist threatens the very structure of the colony and everything on which it is built—insipid publicity, gossip columnists, stars who are pretty but can't act, stupid producers and directors, mass production policy.

This basic threat of the artist may explain some of the bitterness surrounding the disagreement of Louis B. Mayer and John Huston at MGM over the filming of "The Red Badge of Courage." As Gottfried Reinhardt, the producer of that picture, told Lillian Ross:

(Mayer) . . . thinks that John's whole point of view is corroded. He thinks John represents stark realism, which he hates. He thinks I am an intellectual European.

The gossip columnists, the publicity men, and the agents have an economic stake in the entertainer's position. Perhaps this explains the hostility evident in this bit from a Hollywood gossip columnist in the *Pasadena Independent* blasting at Stanley Kramer, a producer often identified with the artists:

Columbia is fed up with producers posing as geniuses who turn out such sombre "masterpieces" as "Death of a Salesman." There'll be no more sad songs for Columbia prexy Harry Cohn.

The artists offer a further threat. The entertainer is perpetually attempting to "please the people," to find out what it is they want to see. Pictures made on such a basis dare not reveal any critical insight whatsoever. For example, every group must be favorably presented, no member of a group can be a villain. No profession can contain any dishonest members. Lawyers, doctors, clergymen, salesmen, all are "true blue." All these various groups keep their eyes on Hollywood to see that this remains the case. Any implied criticism, any suggestion of critical self-judgment

is met with box-office pressure and a decline in profits. Hollywood has an economic stake in illusion.

Richard Brooks says cynically of his fictional producer:

Everybody was at him, at him all the time. All kinds of pressure groups, censorship agencies, watching his script for every pimple of discontent with the American Way of Life, whatever that was. . . . And the only way, according to them, to show happy Americans was to show that they were stuffed with Turkey, God, and New Models of Automobiles.

The present fear of communism casts a political shadow over this economic and philosophical fight. "Honest" pictures like "Death of a Salesman," and "Streetcar Named Desire" are alleged to be "pink" or "unAmerican." One actor in a conversation even said "The Next Voice You Will Hear" as well as "Red Badge of Courage" were "pinko," the former for certain brief sequences which may have suggested all was not perfect in America and the latter because it was against war (the "Commie line").

The American Legion has played a large role here, nearly paralyzing the industry with fear by handing lists to all the studios naming those who have been charged with being friendly to communism or being affiliated with "subversive organizations." The Legion did not divulge the sources of the accusations or the nature of them. Besides the American Legion the highly vocal Jack B. Tenny, former head of the Un-American Activities Committee of California, has made many charges and has represented the "Wage Earners Committee" which has been picketing theatres showing films by Dore Schary and Stanley Kramer.

There have been communists in Hollywood, and probably communists have made a systematic effort to infiltrate Hollywood against which we should be on our guard. But the evidence thus far is that the pictures written by actual communists have been some of the most stereotyped, vapid, and innocuous ever produced, and that much of the pressure of the "anti-communists" has really been an attack by the entertainers against creative and courageous non-communist artists.

The various pressure groups with their implied financial threat all conspire to create a vacuous cinema with the motto, "No controversy, please." It is virtually impossible to make honest films, films which communicate some kind of self-judgment or self-transcendence to the public. Such self-awareness is a threat, for it may imply criticism. The "artist," therefore, is also a threat, for he is a judgment on an industry which trades in illusion. The perceptive artist understands his position.* Frequently he is all the more dangerous to present patterns because he perceives that the entertainment thesis is really a rationalization to cover a fundamental irresponsibility on the part of the movie makers.

Christians do not have to share completely the "realist" side of this controversy in order to affirm that "pure entertainment" is a fiction. What does one mean by "pure entertainment"? It cannot mean the films have no content or that such content does not evoke emotions, desires, and ideas in the audience.

Cecil B. DeMille may have thought he was producing "pure entertainment" back in the early twenties with his bedroom farces such as "Male and Female," "Why Change Your Wife," "Forbidden Fruit," "Fools Paradise." But it is easy to see, as Lewis Jacobs shows, that his flaunting of sex, his advocacy of new morals and condoning of illicit relationships, and his lampooning of marriage fidelity spoke for the "hedonism of a nation on the wave of prosperity, (and) . . . helped to set new styles of social behavior." Mr. DeMille's recent pious utterances concerning religion, and his "religious" movies like "Samson and Delilah" may at second glance show that DeMille not only finds "religion" to be currently merchandisable but, also, rather uninteresting unless it has "magnitude," "grandeur," and the well-proportioned and thinly clad bodies of Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr.

Hollywood could not last producing "pure entertainment." All the symbols—motherhood, God, the flag, family, love, divorce

*The defensiveness of Hollywood on this score was clearly revealed in the summer of 1952 when a Beverly Hills theatre refused to show Ben Hecht's acid satire on Hollywood, "Actors and Sin," on the grounds that it was "detrimental to the best interests of the motion picture industry."

—reflect a tacit philosophy of life. And these symbols and the stories built around them have a telling effect on a generation raised on them.

Roger Manvell, distinguished Director of the British Film Academy, lists in *Film* what he feels to be the overall burden of American films. Some of the more striking items are:

Wealth in the abstract is a good thing.

Luxury, especially associated with women, is normal.

A sock in the jaw is an honest man's answer.

Men should appraise women by externals, with close-ups of essentials.

Women should be judged satisfactory on the basis of desirability.

Sex is probably the most important sensation in life.

Things of the spirit are either funny, eccentric, charlatan, or ever so wonderful. (Art is usually debunked as artiness, religion as mania, mysticism as a yearn in soft focus.)

Reformers are either harmless saints or agitators. (No controversy, please. . . .)

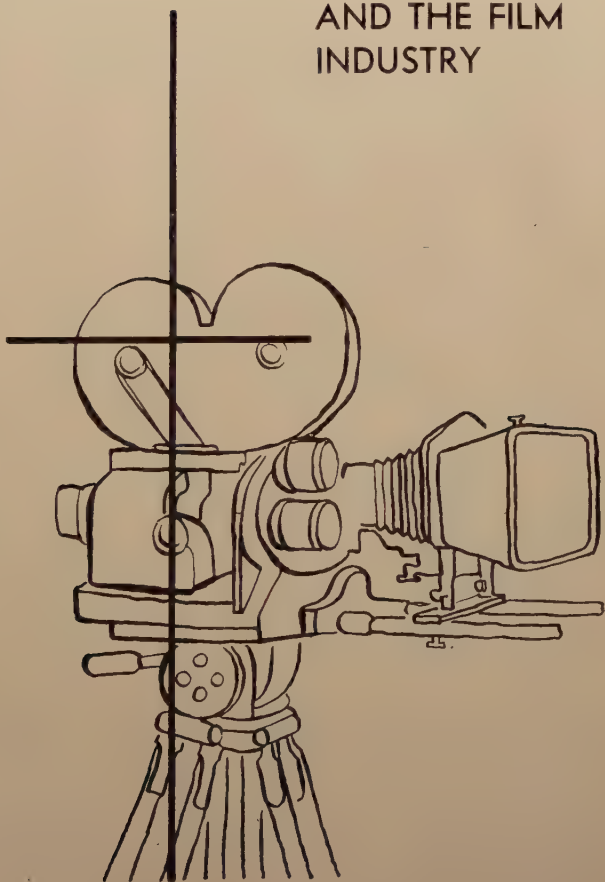
Brainless patriotism is preferable to national self-criticism.

Life is a lark if you have the facilities. Boy gets girl is the end of life's difficulties, divorce is as easy as a . . . (lark) . . . and riches are the reward of virtue.

In so far as the motion pictures communicate ideas, they are more than pure entertainment. The motion pictures provide a series of ideas about the family, marriage, love, and the good life, which serve as a framework of meaning and interpretation to millions for whom they may be the primary means of organizing experience into some kind of coherent whole.

The motion pictures over a period of years reflect and also create a climate of values which is the unconscious guide for behavior and evaluation of ideals. The motion pictures help to create a philosophy of life in American culture.

4 CHURCHES AND THE FILM INDUSTRY



The Churches and the Film Industry

The Church has a special interest in institutions that propagate a philosophy of life. Since her own function is, in part, to provide the basic framework of meaning, her concern with the motion picture is analogous to her concern with other religions and other theologies.

Once this is acknowledged there arises the more perplexing problem—what is to be the Church's role as an institution? * On past occasions her response to the movies has either been one of withdrawal or of overt coercion on behalf of a narrow moralism. Neither approach is adequate; the first, because it solves nothing, the second, because the moralistic demands of the churches have only succeeded in eliminating the more obvious depictions of vice. In the process, however, they have actually contributed to a larger irresponsibility. The Motion Picture Production code of "do's" and "don'ts" was formulated to appease the churches. But the code which demands that right always triumph and that there be compensating values for sin is one of the straitjackets on writers and directors which makes it necessary for them to create stereotypes and to remove all the depth from the portrayal of character. The fundamental human situation is perverted on behalf of "morality."

The motion pictures present a unique problem of censorship, since they are a mass medium available to children. Because motion picture makers seek profit they are always tempted to appeal to the lowest common denominator of human desire. Perhaps one of the most constructive actions the churches could take would be to declare their repentance of actions they have taken in the past and to offer their best guidance to the motion picture industry to help develop a policy of self-control which could reconcile the demands of artistic creativity and the problems of a mass medium.

* The Broadcasting and Film Commission, National Council of Churches, has had an office in Hollywood since April, 1951 with the following functions: I Administration, II Script Evaluation, II-A Liaison with the Motion Picture Industry, III Radio, IV Television, V Education and VI Film Production. In a nine-month period 191 scripts were evaluated.

The churches must continually strive for understanding of the forces at work within them that tempt them to stultify creativity on behalf of a narrow moralism. Such understanding would attempt to guard against identifying provincial prejudices with Christian morality.

The Church's ability, as an institution, to modify the internal character of the American motion picture industry is very limited. The Protestant churches cannot act as one body with any appreciable degree of unity or authority. They have no agency, as do the Catholics in the Legion of Decency, which can speak decisively for Protestants. The Protestant churches do, however, have other means which may not be so obvious but which could have an important influence over a long period of time.

If the churches understand the nature of the present industry and the nature of the needed reforms, this in itself would be an important factor in affecting the outcome of the artist-entertainer controversy. Through its own means of communication the Church could lend the support of a vast body of public opinion to those within Hollywood who are fighting for more perceptive and honest films.

The Church's inadvertent support of the people who have made Hollywood worse was demonstrated at the last General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The Social Action committee urged the churches to use their influence on the mass communication agencies to give "honest interpretation . . . and responsible portrayal of life's values." The committee, also, attacked McCarthyism, and deplored "guilt by association" and "unsubstantiated charges" as denials of human rights. But this same Assembly praised Cecil B. DeMille for bringing "Bible stories to more people than any other man," and heard him gladly. In so doing they failed to see the continuity between Cecil B. DeMille's career in the twenties and thirties, when he made straight sex comedies, and the present, when his "religious" pictures reflect the same devotion to the cheap and flamboyant values of "show business"—sex, sentiment, and spectacle. Cecil B. DeMille is one of the chief

spokesmen for the external entertainment thesis in Hollywood. And ironically, within a few months he became one of the leaders of a Hollywood group defending Senator McCarthy.

Such an endorsement by the Church of a man who has made his way in the industry by the exploitation of sex and religion must be a severe blow to the artists in Hollywood. They might have expected the Church to be one institution which would understand what they were fighting for.

The churches have concrete means of influencing the motion picture industry.

1. Instead of discouraging those who plan to enter the "secular" fields of journalism, art, and literature and giving preferential treatment to those who enter "full time service," pastors and counselors should make it understood that the cinema can also be a Christian vocation. It should not be tacitly assumed that entertainment is not a service to a community. If the churches understand that motion pictures are a vehicle of meaning, they can be an occasion for religious service.

2. Church-related colleges should be encouraged to create departments of the cinema. Training in such departments ought to include more than technical guidance in the skills of photography, direction and cutting. It should seek to cultivate an imaginative interpretation of the Christian doctrine of man, the nature of tragedy, the theological understanding of human existence and the role of entertainment and play in our culture. As one step, at least, a Fundamentalist college (Bob Jones University) has established a department of cinematography.

3. The religious press ought to devote more space than it does to thoughtful reviews of current pictures. For the most part the reviews now are confined to a brief paragraph which attempts to summarize the plot and to indicate whether or not the picture is suitable for children. If the motion pictures are a mirror of the community and its values, then they can be used as vehicles for a religious judgment of those values. Reviewers could analyze some of the theological implications of Hollywood's treatment of the past (the reconstruction of history), or the future (a walk into the sunset), of romantic love as redemption, or of the denial

of risk and mystery. These themes could provide an occasion for a deeper understanding of the American mind and the Christian's relation to it.

4. The religious press might devote more attention to educating ministers and youth workers in motion picture criticism and in the discernment of themes which are antithetical to or sympathetic with Christian teaching. Comments on the motion pictures provide some of the best opportunities to talk to young people in language they understand and can appreciate.

5. The larger church bodies might find it profitable in the long run to sponsor or help sponsor educational programs for those who plan to enter the industry or who are already in it. Perhaps contact could be made with those who are Christians and those who have produced works that are in fundamental agreement with certain Christian insights.

These people could be brought together for conferences in order to discuss their problems and their own relationship to the motion pictures. Theological seminaries might consider the advisability of offering one-year theological programs to those who are wrestling with the relation of the Christian faith to vocations like law, literature, or the movies.

But all of these suggestions presuppose a deeper conviction that the Church must seek to understand itself in relation to the culture.

The Larger Question

A study of the motion pictures and of the possible action of the Protestant churches raises the larger question of the Church's relation to society. This is the question *Social Action* has dealt with in the past (*The Christian Faith and the Protestant Churches*, May 1952) and will deal with throughout this year. As we understand it the basic problem is, "How does the Church relate her faith in Christ to the world?" Or we may put it slightly differently, "What is the role of the institutional Church in relation to other institutions of our culture?" These questions

are not exactly the same, but they are posed sharply by the kind of study we have undertaken here. For the faith of the Church is that God has called us into a visible body for a redemptive purpose. Our question is, "How are we to accomplish that purpose?"

Frequently it seems that Protestantism has no answer to these questions. Even worse, it sometimes appears that the churches are not even aware of the questions. Roman Catholicism has a doctrine of natural law. As a theological principle, this doctrine provides a means by which that Church can relate her own faith to secular culture. The notion of natural law allows the Roman Catholic Church to derive ethical norms for secular institutions without blurring her distinction between the secular world and the Church, the realm of nature and the supernatural.

Protestantism has a justifiable suspicion of natural law theory. But we do not seem to have anything to put in its place, any imaginative theological principles by which we can interpret all of culture and bring it under the judgment of the truth as we apprehend it. As this magazine has attempted to point out, the doctrine of the separation of Church and State as usually conceived is woefully inadequate. Sometimes it has been a mandate for abdication by the churches of concern with the larger ethical battles of society in which the lives of men are won and lost.

The Church will only come to understand herself and her own destiny as she comes to understand her Lord. But a knowledge of a Lord who governs a whole world and who is concerned with all of life—even the movies—must shame us into repentance for our partial and fragmentary concerns. Yet such knowledge of Him and understanding of ourselves also brings hope. We know that God in Christ has brought us into existence as a community. Our faith is in the hope that He will redeem us as a community. We work, then, even as He works, to redeem the whole body of which we are a part. This is surely the meaning of the Biblical injunction, "take all thoughts captive to Jesus Christ."

—V. H. AND W. L. M.

Introducing William Miller, Editor

Fortunate indeed is the ship with a mate ready and willing to take the Captain's place when he leaves the helm. So, too, is Social Action with William Miller in the position of interim Editor. He was one of the group preparing the 1951-52 series and took special responsibility for the preparation of the issues on American Politics and the American Economy. Earlier, he had contributed articles on "Foreign Policy and Public Opinion" (January, 1951) and "A Catholic Plan for a New Social Order" (February, 1951). A friend and colleague of the former Editor, Kenneth Underwood, he has been in close touch with the planning and production of the magazine.

Mr. Miller is a graduate of the University of Nebraska, and has a B.D. degree from Yale. He is a Presbyterian minister. He has done his work for the doctoral degree at Yale University and is now instructing in the department of Christian ethics at the Divinity School. He has been a member of the group preparing and producing the radio program, "Religion at the News Desk."

Our former Editor, Kenneth Underwood, in addition to his teaching at the Yale Divinity School, has now assumed responsibility at Wesleyan University. During the past three years he has given Social Action creative leadership and competence of the highest quality. We appreciate his exceptionally fine service as Editor when we hail William Miller as his worthy successor.

—RAY GIBBONS

*A young preacher from Hollywood
writes about the movies*

You go to the movies. You see different kinds of movies — good, bad, and terrible. Probably you have wondered who and what determines the kinds of movies you see. Probably you have asked yourself what Christians can and should do about Hollywood movies. Here is an article you will want to read.

Van Harvey, the author, is a minister's son from southern California, where he came to know something of Hollywood stars, its studio personnel, and its problems. He talked to many of his friends in the movies in preparation for this article. Mr. Harvey continued his interest in motion pictures while he studied for the ministry at Princeton and Yale. He has read voluminously on Hollywood, all the way from fan magazines to sociological studies — and, of course, he has seen lots of movies. He is now working for a Ph.D. in Religion at Yale, and his special interest, the theology of culture, is an attempt to relate Christian faith to problems and institutions and sources of meaning in the world — like the movies. He writes with special knowledge of both the theological interpretation of culture and the motion picture industry.